

# Vermont's New Bully Prevention Law

How it came to be

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# Our Son Ryan

- Ryan Patrick Halligan died of suicide on October 7, 2003 at the age of 13
- Family, Friends and Community All Shocked
  - Happy-go-lucky, lots of friends, well liked by adults
  - Struggled as a student and at sports but loved acting and comedy
- Bullied by a few boys and girls since age 11
  - Being very sensitive made him an easy target
  - Targeted for lack of athleticism and academic capability

# The Bullying

- We thought it had peaked Dec 2002
  - cried at the kitchen table, he implored us not to go to the school because they only make it worse
  - Discussed coping strategies
  - Taught him self defensive moves
- Near blows Feb 2003
  - He felt good about himself for holding his own

# Bullying Worsened

- We did not learn this until after his death
  - Ryan had befriended the bully for a short while and shared something very personal
  - Bully turned on Ryan and spread rumors that he was gay at the end of the school year
- He tried to “remake” himself during the summer
  - But his plan backfired at start of new school year

# The School

- Met with principal and guidance counselor to understand what happened
  - Why did my son not trust them to “fix it” ???
  - Quickly understood after they described their ill conceived “conflict resolution” policy and procedures
- Felt school was not dealing with and preventing bullying effectively
  - No comprehensive training of staff in prevention
  - Principal stated his school was no worse or different than any other middle school in VT

# Went Public

- We decided to do a two part story in our town paper
  - Response was overwhelming, many parents shared frustration with school and confided their child has been suicidal too
- Created <http://www.ryanpatrickhalligan.com>
  - Developed a public campaign to address:
    - Bullying
    - Suicide
    - Internet Misuse

# Researched the Law

- Discovered Bullypolice.org
  - quickly assessed VT was severely lacking (C+ grade was too generous 😊)
- Met with my state representative who was also Ryan's grade school principal (retired)
  - He understood the problem well
- Jointly met with dept of ed attorney
  - He agreed VT's harassment law did not address bullying
  - Mentioned it was looked at years ago but legislators felt this was just kids being kids

# Bill H.629 Introduced

- Submitted Bill to the house on January 27, 2004
  - Initially modeled after NJ's law
  - Assigned to the Education Committee
- Wrote introduction e-mail with a link to my son's website
  - Sent a letter to the Lt. Governor and Governor
    - LT GOV's son was a classmate of Ryan's

# Lobbying

- Dropped in at the state house frequently
  - Met with LT. Gov often
  - Lots of face time with the House and Senate Education Committees
    - Sat in on hearings and then introduced myself and asked if they looked at bill H.629
    - Tried to hitch a ride on bill H.113 which was a 3 yr old racial and sexual harassment improvement bill
      - Asked “What about the other 80-90%?”

# Community Forum

- Essex CHIPS (youth oriented non-profit) agreed to host a forum
- Planning task force started in February
- Three hour event held March 24
  - Agenda
    - Keynote: Child Psychologist
    - Power Slide Presentation: Bullying – What's your pain?
    - Study Circle breakout: Define Problem/Suggest Solutions
- Over 350 Attended!
  - Statewide TV and print news coverage
    - Ryan's story told statewide
  - I invited key house and senate members, they were overwhelmed by the numbers and the raw emotion

# Momentum

- News coverage and forum propelled the bill's public awareness
  - Over 70,000 hits at Ryan's website by this time
  - Web page contained link to the bill and a link that automatically created an e-mail addressed to the house and senate education committees
    - They received well over 300 e-mails from all over the state with personal stories supporting the bill
      - Including guidance counselors and teachers

# Public Hearing

- House and Senate Ed Committees held a joint public hearing on April 5
  - Powerful, heartbreaking stories from parents and students
  - A few “arrogant” school administrators claimed problem was under control and the proposed law was unnecessary
  - TV and Print News covered this too creating more public awareness and web traffic

# Personal Appeal

- Called each committee member
  - Even visited a few at their homes
- Created an information booklet for each member, delivered it in person
  - Contents:
    - CT's Bully Task Force Report
    - Examples of other states' law
    - Recommendations for further modification of H.629
- Contacted numerous education lobbyist
  - Principal's, superintendent's, VTNEA, school boards
  - Pressed for a promise to be supportive or neutral
- Presented Ryan's story to the VT Board of Ed
  - Secured Commissioner of Education's support

# Bill Worked

- Committee preferred modeling law after CT versus NJ
  - Fit better with VT's preferred separate definition for harassment
  - Improved the law some more to cover school sponsored events and school buses
- Committee voted 11-0 to send it to the house floor for a vote

# House Vote

## 130-9

**Rep. Kirker of Essex** explained her vote as follows:

“Mr. Speaker:

H. 629 is a bill that I have struggled with. I believe that bullying is a symptom of larger, pervasive, social and cultural issues in our society.

This bill is one more example of the state expecting schools to assume parental responsibilities.

However, I support the bill in the hope that a clear message about the importance of respect in our society will be brought to the forefront. Let us all remember that children learn from adults who model behaviors and set expectations for right and wrong.”

Against:

**Rep. Young of Orwell** explained his vote as follows:

“Mr. Speaker:

The childhood poem “sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me”, is hereby repealed.”

# H.629 Becomes Law

- Quickly passed by the Senate Ed Committee on May 5
- Passed in the Senate Unanimously on May 6
- Signed May 18, 2004 by Governor Douglas



# A New Beginning

- Numerous workshops held by schools throughout the summer
- Schools have revamped curriculum and are addressing their school cultures
- Law put to test already
  - Bullies dealt with swiftly and deliberately
  - “Star” jocks no longer immune to punishment
- The future is now brighter for Ryan’s little brother Conor

# Lessons Learned

- A grieving Dad was hard to ignore
- Support achieved one person at a time
- Harnessed the power of the news media
- Harnessed the reach of the Internet
- Unfortunately it took a tragedy

# Next Steps

- Pressing for mandatory suicide awareness and prevention ed in the middle and high schools
  - Leading a statewide coalition formulating legislative action for 2005
- Expanding an education effort with I-Safe America
  - Addressing “cyberbullying” and other harmful activities